



Critical Theories (or “Lenses”) and Active Reading

Strong readers have no special talent. Instead, they are people who have *chosen*—and I emphasize the word *chosen*—to become active readers instead of passive readers. A passive reader “hears” the text but does not really *listen*. The passive reader demands nothing of the text, asks it no questions. The passive reader gains nothing but boredom from the text. The active reader, on the other hand, carries on an interesting, enriching conversation with the text he or she is reading.

The questions we ask the text are the most important part of the conversation. Our questions make the text to talk to *us*, to *our* experience, to what *we* want or need to learn. The right questions bring any text alive. Where do the questions come from? They come from our experience and knowledge.

You are already familiar with the term “Critical Lens” in a limited sense. As you know, the “Critical Lens” essay on the Regents asks you to interpret two pieces of literature using a quotation. However, **a quotation is not a critical lens. A critical lens is an *idea or theory*; in this case, the idea is contained in the quotation.** When you use the quotation as a critical lens, you know to turn it into a question. You ask, “How does the idea in this quotation apply to the literature I have read?” or “How does the literature I have read support the idea in this quotation?” So you see, you already know how to apply outside ideas to the literature you are reading.

In a general sense, our lenses are the sets of questions we ask when we read a text. It is important that you understand that every study of literature involves reading through a set of critical lenses—and those lenses take many forms that are not quotations. A critical lens can be a psychological theory, a religious belief, a personal experience, and much more. As we look through different lenses, we use different sets of questions to interrogate the text.



Critical Theories that draw on the reader’s life experience

Reader Response

- How does the literature connect to the reader’s experience?
- What does the literature mean to the reader?
- What does the reader learn from the literature?
- What unique experiences and interpretations does this reader bring to the text?

Critical Theories that draw on traditional literary criticism:

Formalist Critics/ New Critics

- How does the author use literary elements and literary devices to convey theme and meaning in the work?
- What is the essential meaning of the text?
- Does the work succeed in its purpose?

Historical/Biographical Criticism

- How may the author’s culture, time, or experiences influence his or her writing?
- What does this text tell us about the life and times of the author?
- What is the connection between the author and the text?

Rhetorical Criticism

- What world view does the author put forth through the text?
- Can the reader trust or accept the world view? Why or why not?
- What assumptions or biases are present in the author's work?

Moral/Philosophical Criticism

- What moral lessons can we find in the literature?
- Did the character(s) make ethical decisions?
- Do you agree or disagree with the beliefs and actions of the characters?
- How would a particular philosophy or philosopher illuminate the text?
- What philosophical questions are addressed by the text? What answers are suggested by the text?
- Do you agree or disagree with the beliefs and actions of the characters?

Critical Theories that draw on sociology: What does the literature say about the society it represents?**Cultural Studies**

- How does the race, ethnicity, religion, or culture of the author influence his or her perspective on society?
- How does the text convey the identities of people of different races, ethnicities, religions, or cultures?
- How does the text comment on issues of race, ethnicity, religion, culture, or other identities?
- How does the text affirm or reject racism, discrimination, bias, and/or stereotypes?

Feminist Criticism

- How does the gender of the author influence his or her perspective?
- How does the text convey gender roles or identities?
- How does the text deal with issues of gender?
- How does the text affirm or reject sexist ideas?

Marxist Criticism

- How does the social class of the author influence his or her perspective?
- How does the text convey the identities of people of different classes?
- How does the text represent power dynamics rooted in money and class?

Lenses that draw on psychology:**Psychological Criticism**

- What psychological conflicts drive the characters or the plot?
- What psychological concepts can help us understand the characters or the world view of the author? (use outside texts or essays to learn relevant theories)

Freudian Criticism

- What are the subconscious fears and desires of the author or the characters?
- What do methods of psychoanalysis such as dream analysis tell us about the character?

Archetypal Criticism

- What universal characters, motifs, and symbols appear in the literature?
- What insight into the literature do these archetypal characters, motifs, and symbols give us?

Lenses that draw on specific ideas:**Quotation as Lens (Regents Task 4)**

- What characters, events, themes, symbols, metaphors, etc. exemplify the idea contained in this quotation?
- What insight into the literature does this quotation provide the reader?

other

A reader may choose any ideas that seem relevant to a text and will give the reader insight into its meaning.